DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 286 633 PS 016 839

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TITLE Teaching the Younger School Children Values.
PUB DATE 87
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Education; *Elementary School Students; Opinions; *Parent Role; *Teacher Role; *Values Education

ABSTRACT

Discussion explores values that ought to be taught to young children in the public schools. Attention is first given to what values are appropriate to teach to children at different ages and appropriate contexts of value learning. Several classroom incidents are offered as examples. Arguments developed in the discussion conclude that schools should share with parents and churches of choice the teaching of values, but should not be expected to bear the entire burden alone. Schools should be mainly concerned with teaching younger children the values described by Honing and Bell (1987) as democratic values set out in the U.S. Constitution, and should not remain value-neutral on these issues. Children should be included in democratic discussions of "value issues," and indoctrination and antagonism in discussing values with parents or children should be avoided. Such an approach will allow families to preserve their ethnic backgrounds and follow their religious persuasions within the framework of a democracy. Seven implications for teachers are listed. (RH)

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Teaching the Younger School Children Values

Susan Partridge

Currently, the teaching of values in the schools is receiving a lot of attention from the general public, from special interest groups, from President Reagan and other national VIP's, as well as from still other notables. Though all believe that schools have a responsibility to teach values and have made statements to that effect, the various statements imply some differences in procedure. It is felt that certain words used in some of the statements might well be open to questioning. An example is offered:

The word, morality, has been used quite frequently, and it would seem that the following definitions found in reputable dictionaries (5) and (11) would support people of different persuasions as to the teaching of values.

Funk and Wagnalls (5)

1. The quality of being morally right; rightness, virtue
2. Conformity to standards of right conduct
3. Virtuous conduct, often sexual virtue
4. The doctrine or a system of the principles of right and wrong conduct; ethics

Webster (11)

1. Moral quality or character; rightness or wrongness, as of an action
2. The character of being in accord with the principles or standards of right conduct; right conduct; sometimes specif., virtue in sexual conduct
3. Principles of right and wrong conduct; ethics
4. A particular system of such principles

It might be added that there could be additional confusion

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because of some people's association of preaching with morality. In general, it is conceded that preaching doesn't get the results obtained through democratic discussions; therefore it would make these people object to it.

The age at which certain values should be taught is debatable. The Surgeon General, C. Everett Koop (7), suggested the third grade as a starting point for educating children about AIDS. However, shortly thereafter, at a conference attended by many notables, Koop among them, the recommended starting point, according to an Associated Press (AP) article (1) was junior high.

This paper is concerned with values to be taught to the younger children. Vice President George Bush (4) has called these "core values of character and citizenship that a democratic society requires." He has named a number of these values in which he feels Americans in general would agree. They include "decency, kindness, duty, tolerance, courage, self-discipline, and respect for law." "Honesty, compassion and tolerance" were values named by former Secretary of Education, Terrel Bell (3), who also feels that the values taught "must be tied to better instruction in the democratic values set out in the U.S. Constitution."

As to values concerned with health, it is felt that little children can be taught that there is a relationship between personal behaviors and health -- washing hands before eating and after eating and after visiting the bathroom, for example. It is

further believed that if they are taught "health values" appropriate for their age level and the "core values" stated by Vice President Bush and Terrel Bell, they will be well-equipped to deal with the more divisive issues with which they become confronted later on.

Reports of scheduled classes for teaching values to the older children have appeared in the newspapers. For the younger children, it is felt that daily life in the classroom provides numerous incidents for the discussion of values. The age level is appropriate; the incident is first-hand; and the children can participate in the democratic discussion of a particular issue. Several incidents remembered from decades of educational experience are offered as examples:

A young black boy, one of very few blacks in this particular school, was standing in an aisle prior to the opening of school. A young girl rushed in, and in a loud and raucous voice shouted, "Out of my way, N____r!" A classmate of hers, a diminutive girl, walked up close to her, and in a soft voice said, "G_____, S_____ may be black, but your heart is black!" This took place about a split second before the young teacher on duty who was standing nearby and who heard the diminutive girl's remark, was about to burst with rage. She felt completely inadequate as she thought of how superior the young girl's immediate handling of the case was to what she had in mind.

The diminutive girl was well-liked and highly respected, and, apparently, she had some effect on the offender because the

offense wasn't repeated, and a change in attitude was noted. What a lesson in compassion and tolerance!

This incident clearly points out the need for teachers to explain what it is they are trying to accomplish and to seek the cooperation of the parents in reaching the goal. The explanation doesn't have to be personal because our Constitution provides the necessary information.

Ignorance is often the cause of intolerance and prejudice, and there is no stronger force to fight against it than knowledge. Imparting knowledge and teaching the children to use this knowledge to think critically is the role teachers can play and which many of them do play. As previously suggested, civil rights and social justice are very much in the Constitution.

Thoughtlessness and selfishness have been quite frequently noted among the young children. An example follows:

It was lunch time, and I____'s mother had packed all of her children's lunches in one container, an old, almost-worn-out suitcase. I____'s brother had eaten his sandwiches and also hers. When she went for her lunch, of course, she quickly learned what had happened. She came screaming to her teacher, "H_____ et his san'wiches, and den he et mine!"

Now, H_____ was tall and thin and never still. He didn't run: he leaped through the air like a deer. Of course, he was always hungry, but on this particular spring day, the first beautiful one in several, he was ravenous, and this took precedence over H_____'s usual thoughtfulness. When confronted,

H_____ admitted that he had done wrong and promised not to do it again. The young teacher shared her lunch with his sister and explained to her that her brother just wasn't thinking, was sorry for what he had done, and had promised not to do it again. H_____ kept his promise, and years later the sister and brother were the best of friends and always tried to help each other.

V_____ was a little black girl, the only one in her class, in an almost all-white school. At Christmas, one year, the mother of one of V_____'s classmates dressed a little black doll in beautiful hand-made clothes and sent it to V_____ as a Christmas present. Upon being given the doll, V_____ slung it across the room. Several classmates rushed to retrieve it. Two girls begged for the doll to be given to them since V_____, apparently, didn't want it. The perceptive young teacher remained calm as she seemed to understand what V_____ might have been thinking. When V_____ learned that the little girls wanted the doll so badly, she changed her mind. The girls were satisfied that V_____ got the doll because she was the one for whom it was intended. Once again, the children "came through" beautifully.

Newspapers often carry articles that lend themselves to a democratic discussion of values appropriate for all ages. One such article appeared rather recently in Abigail Van Buren's (10) column. The title, "Who Killed Cock Robin?" was eye-catching, the contents mind-shattering. A reader of the column wrote to tell of a horrible experience she had had as she walked through a

neighborhood park. Three boys with pellet guns fatally injured a bird. Their shots were followed by peals of laughter. The young woman picked up the dying creature and humanely put it out of its misery. She ended her letter to the columnist thus: "So, if you are looking for the first robin of spring in my neighborhood, it's dead. I buried it down by the creek."

The columnist responded that it is the responsibility of parents to raise children to have reverence for life and to respect all living creatures. She ended her response with a question, "And why must children play with guns, anyway?"

The phrase "all living creatures" is important and one to which almost all children can relate, for often these "creatures" serve mankind and afford many pleasures as well. For example, the robin, just mentioned, eats insects that destroy garden plants and also sings for the enjoyment of children and adults alike. Actually, the killing of robins is believed to be illegal, and the use of pellet guns in some cities is also. It will be recalled that Vice President Bush named "respect for law" one of the values to be taught.

The above incident exemplifies a need, expressed by a substantial number of people, of parents' sharing with schools and churches the responsibility to teach values. To do this successfully, communication lines must be kept open.

It goes without saying that the curriculum provides many opportunities for children to come to grips with values. Stories that little children read, history and literature are examples.

However, it is felt that more attention could be given to the "hidden curriculum" as explained by Power and Kohlberg (8).

Power and Kohlberg explain that children are often put in a double bind by the "hidden curriculum." For example, teachers forbid cheating, yet they, parents, and peers expect success in a competitive environment. The moral sensibilities of students are numbed, so they cheat without any feeling of guilt. Throughout decades, children have been seen copying homework from others, changing marks on report cards, etc., simply to please adults or to gain favor with peers.

Power and Kohlberg seem to feel that the hidden curriculum can be used advantageously in the teaching of moral values. They suggest involving students in "participatory democratic structures for making rules and enforcing them." They add, "Democracy should be a way of life in the school not merely a topic in the social studies curriculum." Of course, there is no quarrel with this, but it is felt that more attention to individualization and the making, by both parents and school authorities, of realistic demands on students would result in better self-concepts. There wouldn't be the need for students to put up a false front, and dishonesty would be lessened.

Most teachers will attest to the fact that students excel in different ways. A child may not be an "A" student in math, yet he/she may have a beautiful singing voice. Another child may not excel in English, yet he/she may have an enviable personality. These assets can be destroyed by unrealistic demands but can be

enhanced by greater understanding on the part of the adults concerned.

It is interesting to note that the "values concern" is not limited to our country. On April 12, 1987, the CBS broadcast of "60 Minutes", parents in England were heard protesting strongly against the way the teaching of values was being handled in the schools. It was expressed as the "breaking up of home life", that "home life was being interfered with," etc.

It is felt that these protesting parents must have been referring to the more divisive issues, not the values expressed in this paper -- those essential to the survival of our democratic way of life. As to AIDS, one of the more divisive issues, Mr. Reagan (9) has said, "Parents must stress morality and avoid a value-neutral approach." However, in the same speech, he said that he supported statements by Education Secretary William Bennett that the dissemination of material pertaining to this particular life-threatening, divisive issue "must be up to the schools and parents, not government." He added that the federal role amounted to "giving educators accurate information about the disease."

Though the above issue is not being emphasized in this paper which is concerned with the very young children, it is felt that if a young child asks an honest question about it, he/she should be given an honest answer.

There are some issues in which the very young are concerned that call for a meeting of the minds of parents and educators.

One example follows, and it shows how the issue was handled cooperatively by teacher and parent.

A mother requested that her little son not participate in the class party. The young teacher expressed her feelings about this. Needless to say, these feelings favored the child. However, so strong were the mother's feelings, based on her religious beliefs, that the final agreement was that the child would be kept a home during the time of the party. Though the solution might well be questioned, the mother did hear the teacher's side; the child didn't have to suffer "sitting the party out"; and the solution was peaceful, thus not likely to shut off all communication between parent and teacher as antagonism might have done.

Parents themselves have been victims of infractions of some of the core values mentioned previously. Two examples come to mind: school children, as they pass by, poking holes in bags of leaves set out to be collected by the sanitation crew and/or ripping off beautiful flowers, simply to throw them on the sidewalk. The help of school personnel in preventing such incidents through their "values program" is welcomed by parents, and public relations are improved. The parents learn that the schools aren't interfering with home life; they're simply upholding values that a democratic society requires.

As a result of recent research, described in an Associated Press article (2), linking bullying to teen suicides, high drop-out rates and other problems, the role of educators and parents

in this regard has been emphasized. Parents ought to readily understand their role and the role of educators in combatting bullying, for their own children might fall victim to it. Through sharing the responsibility with schools and churches, the parents can feel, and rightfully so, that they are doing their part in preserving the democratic way of life.

Conclusion

It is concluded that schools should share with parents and churches of choice the teaching of values but not be expected to bear the entire burden alone. However, it is felt that the schools should be mainly concerned with teaching the younger children the values described by Bill Honing and Terrel Bell (6) as "democratic values set out in the U.S. Constitution" and that they should not remain value-neutral on these issues. It is further concluded that the children should be included in democratic discussions of "value issues" and that indoctrination and antagonism in discussing values with parents and/or children should be avoided. This democratic approach permits families to preserve their ethnic backgrounds and follow their religious persuasions within the framework of a democracy.

Implications for Teachers

1. Treat each infraction of the core values essential to life in a democracy fairly and as it happens. With the very young children, if there is too great a time lapse, much will be lost. Do not remain value-neutral on issues in which these core values are concerned.

2. Conduct democratic class discussions of values of interest and concern to the young children. In addition to daily infractions, which are somewhat personal in nature, newspapers, children's storybooks, history and literature, are good sources for issues concerned with values, and the discussion of these issues can be less personal.

3. Seek the cooperation of parents in your "values program."

4. Do not inflict your personal standards on children or parents.

5. Avoid delving too deeply into the divisive issues with the very young children. Their learning and practicing of the values essential to their health and to the democratic way of life ought to prepare them to handle the divisive issues as they meet them.

6. Be aware of the social values in the community in which you teach. Avoid antagonism.

7. Keep abreast of all research dealing with the teaching of values. This provides "neutral ground" in discussing values with parents.

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